

Pierre Beaudet

# Archaeological Monitoring Butchery or Surgery?

I would like to quote an excerpt from a 1996 article printed in a Canadian newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*:

Rome—Once again, digging up the streets to modernize the capital has rewarded Romans with a slice of their past. This time, the prize is a cluster of Renaissance-era Jewish temples thought destroyed in a fire.

For a couple of years, cobblestone streets in the neighbourhood known as the Old Ghetto have been ripped up so Rome's utility companies could lay down new lines....

All traces of the synagogues had been believed destroyed by a fire in 1893.

The discovery of temple ruins, whether Jewish, Greek or Roman, can be considered a *definitely* remote possibility in the trenches of our North American cities, parks, forests and fields. Almost as remote, some Quebec City archaeologists would say, as finding the grave of Samuel de Champlain, the city's founder, under Buade Street in Old Town. There, rumour as it, it waits to be discovered despite extensive roadwork and other infrastructure disturbances. However these are not reasons to give up or curtail the practice of archaeological monitoring wherever warranted.

Opinions are sharply divided on the practice of monitoring excavations conducted for non-archaeological objectives. Often taken for granted in our historic urban and rural districts, it has recently come under somewhat vigorous attack by some public and private sector advocates, particularly those concerned with the reduction of costs. For some, "archaeological monitoring is bunk and useless! It may ease some people's conscience, but it's only supervised destruction with no benefits for knowledge." For others, to the contrary, it is viewed as "an excellent means of investigation with the least expenditure possible!"

*Butchery or surgery—what is it really?*

A purely theoretical examination of monitoring does not give a satisfactory answer to this question, particularly in light of its variable application in a wide range of contexts. Accordingly, I

will try to provide an answer regarding the merit of monitoring by examining its use within an organization I know well, Parks Canada. Actual examples encountered by staff archaeologists and consultants will help illustrate what I believe is a practice that, when used judiciously, can serve well both research objectives and cultural resource protection.

Parks Canada operates a large network of National Parks and National Historic Sites that, in principle, enjoy a high level of cultural and ecological protection. It also provides advice and professional guidance to other federal land managers—departments and agencies—responsible for sites where archaeological resources are often much more vulnerable.

For Parks Canada, in the context I am familiar with, monitoring has often proved to be a useful way of acquiring information rather than a just difficult and frustrating experience. But it takes a lot more than just passive observation to make it into a worthwhile tool.

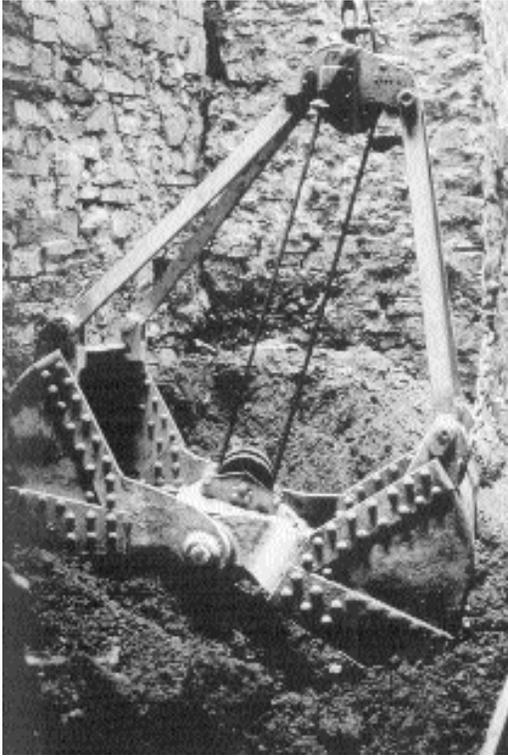
*Yes to monitoring, but not just monitoring*

Monitoring of excavations makes up a large part of an archaeologist's field time even within the protected confines of Parks Canada's national parks and historic sites. It is carried out either in the context of well-planned major or minor operations or as a result of housekeeping activities and emergencies.

To choose monitoring as a means of mitigation is a difficult choice and requires careful con-

Monitoring excavations at the St. John's Bastion, Quebec City. Photo by Robert Gauvin.





Monitoring excavations at the St. John's Bastion, Quebec City. Photo by Robert Gauvin.

sideration for its results can be either harmful or positive, not only for the cultural resources concerned, but for our ability to make other future judicious decisions.

Choosing to monitor everything, indiscriminately, can be the worst decision of all, for in the end, we may no longer have the credibility required for our recommendations to be taken into consideration, either by our professional colleagues of other disciplines and field personnel involved in the projects or by

those who foot the bill, from the land manager to the public. Thus, it is our responsibility to determine carefully for each case what means of mitigation—if any—are justified by a specific site and context.

Recommendations must take several factors into account: our knowledge of a site from previously conducted field work or documentary sources, the nature and relative value of the putative resources, and the type of work being subjected to mitigation. Their interplay should largely determine the usefulness of monitoring as a mitigative response, either as a stand alone measure or as part of a wider archaeological strategy.

Each monitoring activity which does go ahead, whether major or minor, planned or urgent, must be viewed by its practitioners as an opportunity to discover or, at least, to further document the archaeological identity of a site. The smallest of these may often serve only as “archaeopsies” or soundings, helpful in the diagnosis of a site for future reference, while large-scale ones may well provide a wider picture and a wealth of data which would otherwise have been lost. Either, however, may lead to situations where more meticulous archaeological work is required, including salvage excavations.

Monitoring is not a panacea that can be applied to all sites in all circumstances. At Parks Canada, it is applied, in isolation or by itself, in certain emergency situations where excavation work is on a very small scale and the potential is relatively limited, or for very large construction

sites where we are mainly concerned with recording architectural remains or where archaeological field work alone is not cost effective or a feasible alternative.

In most cases, however, monitoring is only one step in a broader research design, a process which may include establishing a site's potential and resource inventory, selective excavation, monitoring, data analysis and the publication of results.

#### *The Fortifications of Québec*

The Fortifications of Québec, through a series of major stabilization projects, has repeatedly provided excellent examples of the use of monitoring as a key element in our overall archaeological strategy. Indeed, with their extensive earthworks set against massive masonry walls—often several metres in height—the fortifications lend themselves well only to very selective manual archaeological investigation. Access to much of the archaeological strata and hence data relies, in great part, on the observation of excavations conducted in the course of the stabilization work itself. Thus, following the selective investigation of particularly rich or fragile sectors, archaeologists have spent weeks and often months watching the swaying motion of power shovels, examined the ill-defined sides and base of trenches, and recorded thousands of scraps of information relating to the anatomy and evolving function of entire defensive works. Previous defence alignments, buttresses, cannon embrasures and, in more than one instance, burial places have all been discovered or unearthed through careful and attentive monitoring.

Let us examine more closely a specific sector of the fortifications known as St John's Bastion. For nearly three years, one of our colleagues, Robert Gauvin, braved its heights and depths, the rain and the cold, to record a host of observations. When first undertaken, merits of this lengthy monitoring project could well have been questioned for two somewhat similar works, the St Louis and Ursulines bastions, had already been examined, and the richest sectors of the site itself carefully excavated. However, despite evident kinship, no two defensive works of the city's western front are the same in their history, function and physical characteristics. These differences and some notable similarities now form a quasi-anatomical portrait of a complex structure whose configuration evolved considerably through time (Gauvin, 1993).

Looking back, we can definitely say that the monitoring was worthwhile. Apart from the data regarding the site itself, we also gained insight concerning construction practices that extend well beyond the works in question. For example, what

at first appeared to be insignificant anomalies on the interior face of the bastion's walls revealed themselves to be, through cross-site analysis of structural recordings, convincing evidence of the fleeting existence of temporary passageways designed to facilitate the carting of materials and the razing of the walls. For those with an interest in fortifications, an article on this subject will appear in an upcoming issue of the Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology journal.

The importance of careful monitoring of non-archaeological excavations could also be exemplified through discussion of several other recent projects conducted by Parks Canada at Grosse-Île-and-Memorial-to-the-Irish NHS (disinfection building and new utility services), along the Lachine canal and elsewhere.

The eye of a good observer and the hand of a quick writer—for monitoring and recording—are thus inseparable partners in the process in question. So is peripheral vision.

#### *Peripheral Vision*

The organizer of a recent workshop on monitoring, in a list of questions prepared for speakers, brought out the concerns of some people regarding the value of monitoring for research, as it is often a narrowly focussed activity whose direction is dictated more by the developer than the archaeologist (Conference of the Association des Archéologues du Québec, April 26-28, 1996). Such concerns are justified and constitute a major challenge that is often difficult to meet. There is, indeed, a great risk that data collected through scatter-shot monitoring will be consigned straight to oblivion. Disconnected data, technical reports, multiple clients and limited circulation are all serious obstacles or deterrents for those interested in making sense of this research.

Accordingly, archaeologists responsible for monitoring must possess a very broad peripheral

vision or otherwise all sense of context may be lost. One must look beyond the trenches! A difficult task in the controlled archaeological investigations, this process can become a nightmare in the difficult and urgent conditions of most monitoring situations.

#### *Data Linkage*

Peripheral vision, even supported by a minimum of prior documentation, is not sufficient. We need the ability to combine data from successive and neighbouring work sites. This requires the pooling of data and records to provide an overview. At Parks Canada and in some large municipalities such as Quebec City and Montréal, we are fortunate in that we can keep composite and updated maps of remains for almost every site, so that even the smallest discoveries can potentially be integrated. But overall, public repositories of archaeological documentation appear to have difficulty in even keeping abreast of basic collecting and filing, let alone the establishment of basic linkage mechanisms or databases.

#### *A Capacity to Intervene*

In addition to developing effective peripheral vision and linkage mechanisms, another major ingredient must be present to make monitoring an acceptable data collection tool for research purposes. That is the possibility, when required, to conduct appropriate salvage excavations despite the disruptions involved in the developer's schedule. This concession, often difficult to negotiate even within the context of Parks Canada, is one that often makes all the difference between the destruction of a site and its preservation. Legislation and regulations alone are not sufficient for effective intervention. Awareness and good will on the promoters part as well as persuasive archaeologists are also required!

The work carried out at Cap Toumente, which is described in a new work published in French by Les Éditions du Septentrion in co-operation with Parks Canada and the Canadian Wildlife Service (Guimont 1996), is one instance where monitoring and digging followed each other as in a relay race, putting the runners to the test throughout the process. The result was the discovery, among other remains, of fragile yet diagnostic components of Samuel de Champlain's 17th-century agricultural establishment. The increased awareness by management

*The temporary vaulted passageways observed through monitoring at the St. John's Bastion, Quebec City. Photo by Robert Gauvin.*



and the public concerning the reserve's significant cultural heritage resources was also a most important outcome of this relay project.

Work carried out at the site of the wheelwright's shop at the Forges du Saint-Maurice NHS during repairs to a waterway is another excellent example of the interaction between monitoring and other forms of archaeological mitigation (Drouin 1995). In this case the sequence was: monitoring of trenching, discovery of remains, testing, rescue excavation and a change of plans by which the further disturbance of archaeological resources could be avoided. This quick succession of events, with monitoring at its source, thus served to increase our knowledge of the site and to ensure the conservation of significant archaeological remains directly tied to the object of commemoration of the site.

#### *Conclusion*

I would like to express the view that monitoring has proven to be an important tool in the practice of archaeology, one which deserves to be used whenever justified. When carried out under favourable conditions by competent practitioners, monitoring can serve both as the front-line in the protection and recording of our buried heritage, and with the right ingredients, as a rich documentary source for the study of our past.

#### *Summary*

*Archaeological monitoring is bunk and useless! It may ease some people's consciences, but it is only supervised destruction... Archaeological monitoring, what an excellent way to investigate a site without having to pay too much! Butchery for some, surgery for others—let's put things in perspective.*

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## NPS Archeology Program

In the U.S., the National Park Service carries out the archeological responsibilities that Parks Canada has taken on for national parks and federal agencies in Canada. Since the beginning of the 20th century, when the Antiquities Act that protected archeological sites on public lands became law and began to influence public policy, the NPS has been relied upon as a source of expertise and knowledge for public archeology in the U.S. These government-wide archeology and historic preservation responsibilities were expanded in 1935 by the Historic Sites Act and again later by the National Historic Preservation Act, the Archaeological Resource Protection Act, the Abandoned Shipwreck Act, and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

At one time, NPS archeologists provided professional and technical support for all agencies. However, since the 1970s, other public agencies, in particular land management agencies, have built professional staffs in archeology. These agencies now undertake their own archeological activities.

The NPS archeology program provides for the identification, evaluation, interpretation, protection, and preservation of archeological resources in national park units. We also carry out the leadership and coordination of federal archeology programs assigned to the Secretary of the Interior by several United States statutes. The coordination and leadership of federal archeology by the NPS is exercised through regulations, guidance, and cooperative activities with other federal agencies on topics of special importance. Current examples of such topics are: archeological collections management, public outreach, the protection of archeological resources, and providing appropriate access to archeological information and records.

We hope to continue to share program information and technical expertise with our partners in Canada.

—Francis P. McManamon  
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and Departmental Consulting Archeologist  
National Park Service